



Review of Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socratic Moral Psychology"

Citation

Jones, Russell E. 2011. Review of "Socratic Moral Psychology," by Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith. Polis 28 (1).

Published Version

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/imp/pol/2011/00000028/00000001/art00008>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33907955>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socratic Moral Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Reviewed by Russell E. Jones, Harvard University

Scholars of Plato's dialogues will no doubt be familiar with the work of Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, and this latest offering from the duo will not flout expectations, either in terms of the high quality or in terms of the style and substance of their interpretative approach. They here attempt to offer a coherent interpretation of the moral psychology expressed by the character Socrates in Plato's so-called Socratic dialogues. Their Socrates is an intellectualist about motivation. In other words, Socrates thinks that one's *actions* always follow one's beliefs about what is in one's overall best interest at the time of action. So much is fairly standard in Socratic scholarship. But central to Brickhouse and Smith's interpretation is a rejection of another aspect of what we may call the standard interpretation. On the standard interpretation, not only one's actions but also one's *desires* always follow one's beliefs about what is in one's overall best interest at any given time. Or to put the point a bit more cautiously, insofar as one has desires that do not follow one's beliefs about what is in one's overall best interest at any given time, these are not desires that serve as causes of one's actions. Only rational desires – those that follow the agent's beliefs about her best interest – explain the actions she performs. Brickhouse and Smith reject the claim that Socrates thinks that one's desires always follow one's beliefs about what is in one's overall best interest at any given time. Indeed, sometimes things are quite the other way around; sometimes belief follows desire. Among other things, such an account opens up avenues for, and perhaps even demands, an account

of the development of desires as part of moral development and an account of the effect of punishment on desires.

After a brief introduction, the book opens with a chapter offering an “apology of Socratic studies”. The chapter is not integral to the specific content of the book (that is, as a book on Socratic *moral psychology*), though it is foundational to the kind of project of which the book is an instance (that is, a book on *Socratic moral psychology*). Socratic studies, for our purposes, can be construed as the study of the philosophy expressed by the character Socrates in a certain subset of Plato’s dialogues. Brickhouse and Smith mount a thorough and, in my judgment, successful defense of the general program of Socratic studies against recent attacks.

Having addressed the foundational question of the legitimacy of Socratic studies generally, Brickhouse and Smith turn to the specific agenda of interpreting Socratic moral psychology. Chapters 2 and 3 lay out the core of their interpretation. They affirm the element of the standard view that Socrates endorses motivational intellectualism, relying largely on Socrates’ discussion with Polus in the *Gorgias* to make the case. But they strongly reject the element of the standard view that Socratic intellectualism admits only rational desires. Rather, Socrates allows that there are non-rational desires (*epithumiai*; sometimes they refer to these as ‘appetites’ or ‘passions’) which may remain active even when the agent has a concurrent all-things-considered belief that it is not in his overall best interest to pursue the object of the non-rational desire, and which may influence belief and therefore – through belief – action. In support of this interpretation Brickhouse and Smith marshal numerous passages in which Socrates seems to talk of excessively filling up such desires (e.g. *Gorgias* 505a6-10), to endorse displaying courage in the face of such desires (e.g. *Laches* 191e4-7), and to warn against acting badly because of anger, fear, shame, and other such passions (e.g. *Apology* 21b1-23e3, 29e3-30a3, 32b1-d4, 34b6-d1).

Aside from these sorts of cases, they rely centrally on their interpretations of two passages which have sometimes been taken to support the standard interpretation: *Meno* 77b6-78c2 and *Protagoras* 352b1-358d4. While I am not entirely satisfied with their treatment of these passages, here I can only gesture briefly at some concerns. Scholars sometimes read the *Meno* passage as evidence that Socrates thinks no one ever desires what they recognize to be bad. Meno defines virtue as desiring (*epithumounta*) fine things and being able to acquire them. Socrates appears to target the first conjunct because all humans satisfy it, and so it does not help to define the subset of humans who have virtue. The first conjunct would be useful if some humans desired bad things, as Meno thinks at first. But under the pressure of Socrates' examination, in the end Meno agrees that no one desires (*boulesthai*) bad things. So, the passage seems to support the standard view that desire follows belief, and to be a difficulty for Brickhouse and Smith's proposal that sometimes desire does not follow belief.

Brickhouse and Smith emphasize the shift from '*epithumein*' to '*boulesthai*' that occurs part way through the argument, and read the passage as follows. Rather than targeting the claim that some people desire bad things, Socrates is targeting the claim that some people have a *rational desire* (corresponds to instances of '*boulesthai*') for bad things. But, he is leaving open the possibility that some people have *non-rational desires* (corresponds to instances of '*epithumein*') for bad things.

This reading faces at least one significant hurdle to which Brickhouse and Smith do not give much explicit attention.¹ Near the end of the argument, at 78b3-4, Socrates and Meno explicitly agree that 'virtue is to desire (*boulesthai*) good things and to be able to acquire them' *just is* what Meno said earlier. But what Meno said earlier was that virtue is

¹ But for a more detailed discussion of the passage than they provide in the book, see Brickhouse and Smith, "Is the Prudential Paradox in the *Meno*?", *Philosophical Inquiry* 30 (2008), 175-184.

to desire (*epithumounta*) fine things [= good things] and to be able to acquire them. If either Socrates or Meno has in mind a distinction between '*epithumein*' and '*boulesthai*', this agreement should not have come about. Put the other way around, that Socrates and Meno agree that this formulation adequately expresses Meno's original definition is strong evidence that there is no distinction between '*epithumein*' and '*boulesthai*' in the passage. But if that distinction is lacking, the Meno passage is retained as evidence for the standard interpretation.

At *Protagoras* 352b1-358d4, Socrates argues against the view of the many that knowledge can be "dragged about like a slave" by desire, anger, pleasure, pain, love, fear, etc. On the standard interpretation, only rational desires – those that follow the agent's beliefs about her best interest – explain the actions she performs. Since knowledge implies belief, rational desires follow belief, and actions follow rational desires, no one ever acts contrary to her knowledge about her best interest. Against this, Brickhouse and Smith argue that we must recognize the psychological agency of non-rational appetites. This is what gives objects the power of appearance, the power of an object to appear better to an agent than it really is.

Much of their account depends on considering the following specific case. The scene opens just as our protagonist, P, has finished a "very substantial and satisfying meal". The host has prepared one more tasty dish, however, and places a chocolate tart directly in front of P. P is thoroughly sated and, recalling his doctor's advice to avoid rich foods, he declines to eat the tart. As Brickhouse and Smith describe it (p. 77), "P obviously does not at t_1 judge the pleasure of eating [the tart] to be worth the subsequent evil he will suffer." Nevertheless, the host leaves the tart in front of P, and, after a few minutes during which P has digested enough of the meal to no longer feel completely sated, at t_2 there is P, savoring

every last crumb of the tart. Apparently, P now judges the pleasure of eating the tart to be worth the risk his doctor has warned him about.

Brickhouse and Smith ask what it is that gives the tart the power of appearance at t_2 that it lacked at t_1 . They claim that we must appeal to a change in P's appetite, a change that the standard account allegedly cannot accommodate. But here is an explanation that seems to me to be consistent with the standard account: We can agree with Brickhouse and Smith that nothing intrinsic to the tart changes; nor does the apparent size of the tart; nor does the availability of the tart; nor does the risk to P's health from eating the tart. It is indeed P's appetite that has changed: He has gone from feeling completely sated to something less than complete satiety. But this is an objective piece of information of a sort that can be accommodated by the standard interpretation. And it is information that should affect our pleasure calculus. It is simply more pleasant to eat tarts when you are not stuffed. The pleasure of eating is greater when it is not only a pleasure of the tongue but also of the belly; that is, when it contributes to making you feel comfortably full, which is a pleasant feeling. So the standard interpretation seems to allow that there is a change in appetite, which constitutes new objective information, which leads P to recalculate and change his mind about whether eating the tart is in his overall best interest, which leads him to eat the tart. To be sure, P miscalculates by failing to properly weigh the distant health effects against the immediate pleasure. But it was not P's miscalculation that was supposed to be problematic for the standard account, but rather his change in calculation.

While chapters 2 and 3 lay out the core account of Socratic moral psychology, chapters 4 and 5 extend that account in two natural ways: in chapter 4 to account for the way wrongdoing damages the soul, and in chapter 5 to account for moral education. Brickhouse and Smith argue that the standard account cannot adequately explain how wrongdoing damages the soul. After all, the standard intellectualist is committed to saying

that the damage to the soul must be a matter of acquiring new false beliefs, losing old true beliefs, strengthening old false beliefs, or weakening old true beliefs. But an explanation of how wrongdoing might effect such cognitive changes has not been produced, nor is it easy to see how it would go. But Brickhouse and Smith argue that if we adopt their modified intellectualism, we can account for how such cognitive changes might be produced. This is because their account allows non-rational desires to affect belief and – through belief – action. They account for the damage wrongdoing does to the soul by arguing that wrongdoing enlarges non-rational appetites, which then have a larger influence on belief. And, as a corollary, they argue that they can better account for punishment's positive effects on the soul: Punishment disciplines the non-rational appetites in order to decrease their influence on belief. Punishment, then, can serve a corrective – or, we might say, educational – role by having a direct influence on non-rational appetite and only an indirect influence on belief. Brickhouse and Smith argue that the Socratic elenchos can function in a similar way by producing shame in those being examined. Similarly, they argue that Socratic myths can be effective by producing fear in their hearers.

The final two chapters are less integral to the whole, and I will treat them briefly in light of the whole and skip over many interesting elements. Chapter 6 gives an account of Socratic virtue intellectualism, the view that virtue is somehow wholly constituted by a kind of knowledge. The most interesting element of their account of virtue intellectualism with respect to the main argument of the book concerning motivational intellectualism is their account of the imperviousness of knowledge to the effects of non-rational appetite. Unlike one with mere belief – who may be subject to the negative influences of non-rational appetites – a person with the knowledge that constitutes virtue would be immune to the negative influences of non-rational appetites. This, they argue, is because knowledge implies that the appetites are disciplined and maintained in a weak condition.

Finally, they compare their Socrates to his intellectual heirs: specifically, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Along the way, they make a number of substantive and interesting interpretive claims about the moral psychology of the *Republic*, Aristotle's account of akrasia, and more; but as this is not part of the main argument of the book, I will leave it at that. There are in addition an appendix on the place of the *Gorgias* in Socratic studies, a full bibliography, an index locorum, and a general index.

It is worth emphasizing here what I hope is clear from the above sketch: The book offers a rich and enlightening account, both at the highest level of overall argument and at the level of detailed analysis of individual passages. The book is suitable for specialists and perhaps even for some advanced undergraduates. Since one of the main purposes of a review is to help readers determine whether they should invest time and energy in the book, let me close by saying plainly that this latest offering from Brickhouse and Smith well repays the time spent with it.